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ABSTRACT

An overall perspective is made of the disadvantaged child in relation to his education. Various personal and social characteristics of such a child are enumerated as well as what characteristics the teacher should have. The author names three primary needs of the disadvantaged child: cultural readiness, language readiness (both expressive and receptive), and a family that appreciates the value of education, that will support the school in its efforts, and that will provide reinforcement of the values taught there. Four areas are suggested as warranting organization and curricular research. Some of the fallacies present today in the area of educating the disadvantaged are discussed. References are included. (NH)

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THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD
His Personal and Educational Needs

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by

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The most visible of the disadvantaged are those of urban ghettos--in part because the concentration of economic and social disadvantage makes them more evident, but more probably because the dynamic of urbanized poverty and prejudice tends to produce spokesmen of greater ability and greater militancy. The answer to the question, "Who is the educationally or culturally disadvantaged child?" varies from state to state, from city to city. He lives not only in the central area of our great cities. One southern governor in January, 1964, declared that 20 per cent of the citizens of his state can neither read nor write, that 50 per cent of the state's young people fail to complete high school. The disadvantaged child is of no single race or color: poverty, delinquency, failure to achieve the goals established by the main stream of society are shared by peoples of all colors and national origins. How many children and youth need educational programs which will compensate for social and economic disadvantage? A recent authoritative estimate places the number in excess of thirty million.[5]

We all know the reasons for the concentration of the poor in the cities. Within 50 years, the ratio of urban/rural residence has approximately reversed itself. Today, some 70 per cent of the citizens of the United States live in towns or cities, due to the adaptation of technology to farming. Two generations and more ago, the continuum of economic failure/success was as wide as it is today, but the penalties which attended lack of achievement were neither as noticeable nor as great. The poorly educated farm child remained on the farm; while his income may have been submarginal, he and his family ate the produce of the acres which they tilled, often living in a culture which was rich in its own tradition but which did not prepare its members for adaptation to or success in a changing economy.

The poorly educated urban young person found work as a laborer in an economy which was only beginning to discover that machines were cheaper than men or, if female, worked minimum of fourteen hours per day as a domestic or at piecework in the garment factories which were springing up in the cities.

SOME SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD: His Home and Community. The work of Conant, Deutsch, Passow, and Riessman has evolved a litany of the characteristics of the disadvantaged child, some social, some personal, and some educational. Socially, he comes from

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a male-centered culture, except for a major section of the Negro sub-culture; feels alienated from the larger social structure and experiences frustration as a result of these feelings; values masculinity and attendant action, viewing intellectual activities as unmasculine; desires a larger share of the wealth of the economy for the comforts it will buy, but not because it will permit him to move into the middle-class.[8]

If this child is from the Los Angeles area, he is a member of a family whose income is at least 25 per cent below the county median. He lives in a substandard house in an area where the population density is approximately double that of the entire county and where youth delinquency rates are higher in almost all offense categories than for the county generally. Young adults within the Mexican-American and Negro ghettos experience an unemployment rate of approximately 30 per cent.[10]

Metfessel reports two sociological factors which have major impact on the education of the child of poverty:

> Pupils from the culture of poverty have had little home experience with occupations which place a premium on education; indeed, the home may be openly antagonistic to or derisive of the values of education.
>
> Parents from the culture of poverty may fear the effect of formal education on parent-child relationships. Such fears have a two-pronged negative effect on education: the home cannot be counted on to reinforce values taught in the schools and, secondly, these fears tend to enhance suspicions and problems of communication between home and school.[2]

SOME PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD. Often from a culture which does not respond to long-range goals and where there is a belief that school success may be gained without intellectual effort, negative self-concept and the failure to see personal relevance in school-directed tasks appear to be among the more serious detriments to the successful education of the very poor. How many children from poverty areas know well someone who has really succeeded in school? Rather, how many of them have not been taught in the home and community that the school fails to provide learning which is relevant, which is meaningful, and which actually deserves to be learned.

If, as the existentialists tell us, reality lies within the observer, the fundamental nature of the school as it functions within the lives of pupils may be learned by viewing it through the eyes of James Baldwin:

> You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being.
>
> You were not expected to aspire to excellence; you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.

Writing of the time when he became fourteen, Baldwin helps to explain the perceptions of society and of school which lead the disadvantaged or the unsuccessful pupil to truancy or to obtaining a work permit at the earliest possible time:

> School began to reveal itself, therefore, as a child's game that one could not win, and boys dropped out of school and went to work. My father wanted me to do the same. I refused, even though I no longer had any illusions about what an education could do for me; I had already encountered too many college-graduate handymen...One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation; one did not have to be abnormally sensitive to be worn down to a cutting edge by the incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day.[1]

IN A DISCUSSION OF CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHERS OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD, I would include the administrator as well as the classroom teacher; with other ancillary personnel, they form the team which must attempt to develop within the pupil the skills which can fit him to participate successfully in the larger American culture, which can attempt to change native attitudes which appear to be detrimental to success in our society.

As we consider desirable characteristics for the educational team, I would urge that we look beyond the economic and educational impoverishment that often are the criteria used to identify the disadvantaged. The tragedy of the ghetto, of Appalachia, or of the decaying plantation is not alone in the economic plight of the people. The depression years of the thirties showed me, both as high school and college student and as a young social worker, that there is more than one kind of poverty and that the most tragic, the most enduring, is that of the mind and spirit, a poverty often unrecognized by those whose need is greatest. May I share with you a personal experience of disadvantage and the impact of a dedicated teacher?

Forty years ago I was a high school student in an Oklahoma mining town, where the population of 20,000 had no public park, no swimming pool other than the mill ponds, no Boys' Club, no library, no concerts. To our high school came an Australian, an exprofessional soccer player, not as football coach, but as music teacher. To the few hundred of us who were in his band and orchestra and glee clubs during the eight or ten years he was there he brought glimpses of life we had never imagined. It was he who taught us, through the songs we sang, the beauty of poetry--not the English teacher who was concerned that we would know how to identify its metre. It was he who led us to see that there were symphonies and oratories as well the nasal hillbilly songs and the rhythmic, emotional church music we had known all of our lives. Here was a teacher who came to a town which, while not poor economically, would have--by almost any other criterion--contended successfully for the doubtful honor

of being "The Most Disadvantaged American City." Indeed, it was this man who arranged scholarships for at least a half-dozen of us who, without his help, well might have lived out our lives in the environs in which circumstances had placed us.

I am concerned, as I see vast sums of money being channeled into all kinds of special school programs that we teachers will view deprivation either as an impersonal blight affecting such and such an area, affecting such and such a group of schools, or that we will consider only the physical and economic attributes of poverty. I would urge that we look into the need of the spirit of the boys and girls in these disadvantaged communities. As we are helping them to develop skills which can raise their economic potential, let us at the same time increase their cultural and social horizons.

Jablonsky recently described in these words the crucial role of the administrator:

> Given circumstances in which education can take place, the gifted and highly motivated teacher can overcome inordinate obstacles in educating children. But gifted teachers are rare, and someone higher in the organizational structure must create the favorable circumstances.
>
> In some school systems, an isolated school will be identified as doing an exceptional job of educating disadvantaged children, as evidenced by community support, academic achievement, or other criteria. These objectives are achieved far beyond those attained by comparable schools without direct reference to special funds, although special funding is at times in evidence. In each of these schools, one finds a dynamic, determined, and competent principal who has inspired children, parents, and teachers to join in a successful venture. He has an idea which he knows will work. He is in every classroom every day. He knows almost every child, every teacher, many parents, and he cares about them all...Planners at central headquarters and the principal are wisest when they realize that the point of contact is still within the classroom and when they involve teachers in all stages of planning and implementation of programs...[5]

What do we expect of the teacher of the disadvantaged child? She must, to be successful, possess an understanding of the culture within which she is working--an understanding of the pupils' needs, hopes, and frustrations. Surely this teacher must know urban sub-cultural organization and structure and the contributions of major sub-cultural groups.

She must possess knowledge of the dynamics of the civil rights movement--whatever its current name may be. Like them or not, believe in them or not, the teacher to understand the community must know its leaders, both local and national.

Hopefully speaking the language of the minority group with which she works, certainly the successful teacher of reading and of oral and

written English must have an understanding of the structure of the native language of the pupils she is teaching. To this language background must be added knowledge of the most common deviations from standard English, the ability to accept deviant language, and the skill and patience necessary to develop in pupils speech habits which are not markedly dissimilar from those of the main culture.

Describing the teachers in the Center for Educational Development at Northeastern University, Melvin Howards says of them:

> The teachers in our school are firm,sympathetic, and educable--Maybe that's the key word: educable. Too many teachers and administrators are not educable any more. Their college degrees seem to mean completion--an end--to them.[4]

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD. Perhaps the preceding paragraphs should have been subtitled "Needs of the Teacher of the Disadvantaged Child"; in any event, they provide an introduction, a bridge into the portion of these remarks which will deal with needs of the instructional program. Let us first direct our attention to the personal needs of the pupil.

Of prime importance is cultural readiness. The educational hierarchy is not willing, at this point, to take the disadvantaged child as he actually is, to take the materials of his environment and fashion a curriculum from them, to educate him in the vernacular in which he has learned to communicate. Not at all. The teacher--perhaps herself a refugee from poverty and climbing with might and main the ladder to middle-class status--demands, because of administrative pressures or because of a personal distaste for the things of the culture of poverty, instant conversion of the pupil. I would argue that the child of poverty brings with him to school a readiness to learn IF WE WOULD BUT SEEK WITHIN HIS OWN CULTURE THE MATERIALS WITH WHICH TO EDUCATE HIM. Since our behavior is not likely to change in the foreseeable future, the school must plan to provide the experiences which will help the disadvantaged pupil understand the concepts which confront him in every subject area.

A second major personal need is that of language readiness, both expressive and receptive. The child of poverty possesses more language skill than he is generally credited with. The problem arises from the fact that the language he brings to school with him is not acceptable by the teacher. Hurst reports that "...non-standard speakers can demonstrate a high level of verbal creativity when given the proper chance. What is important is that they do this best in relatively unstructured and spontaneous circumstances, and conversely, appear to do worse when in a direct and structured verbal confrontation..."

Why cannot some of you here, highly knowledgeable in both research and in the structure and function of language, assemble a group of teachers and curriculum writers, select and come to know intimately a particular area and its inhabitants, and prepare a total primary program which would capitalize on the child as he is? Most of us teachers see ourselves as Professor Higgins, our pupils as Eliza Dolittle, and simply can't wait until they are out of the first grade to have them speaking as we ourselves speak about the dogs and the airplane trips and the visits to the zoo which appear to comprise the world of the middle-class first grader.

Another major educational need is that of a family who appreciates the values of education, who will support the school in its efforts, and who will provide reinforcement of the values taught in the school. The most cursory review of the headlines of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York reveals that the inner-city is not populated by families who are quoted in the newspapers and whose diatribe against the educucational system is projected on the television screen by each newscaster. Perhaps the most feasible way of attaining this kind of school clientele is to employ community workers who can interpret to the parents the school and its honest efforts--however bungling--and who, in turn, can interpret and convey to educators the desires of parents for their children. Experimental programs are of two general types: one, the certificated persons who spend most of their time working with parents and community leaders; and second, non-certificated who work as teacher aides in the classrooms. Varying degrees of satisfaction are reported with each program. Evidence supports the conclusion that education is prized by even the very poor--but the education they seek must be relevant to their life style.

The Federally-supported educational program with the greatest public acceptance is undoubtedly Head Start; a look at the Johnson budget for fiscal 1969-70 indicates that it is politically popular, as well. This attempt to increase the probability of scholastic success has brought into sharp focus two additional needs: a similar program, aimed at the two-year-old, and a radical revision of our expectancies of children in the kindergarten and first grade. It has long been my conviction that public school people themselves have been responsible for the lack of reasonable content in the primary grades. I wonder if any of you have ever worked on a curriculum planning committee with supervisors or principals who were of the school which believes that if you leave the child alone long enough he will mature to the point at which he is ready to begin to get ready to be taught. Harris, in the Sixtieth Yearbook of the NSSE, clearly demonstrates the divergence of two groups concerned with beginning reading instruction. One avows that "drills and exercises cannot do the job that only growth and maturation and living can do," while the other firmly believes that "certain types of specific training designed to enhance readiness for reading are beneficial."[3]

Head Start has demonstrated effectively that many of the activities heretofore reserved for the five- and six-year-old can very successfully

be learned by the four- and five-year-old. We must carefully re-evaluate the entire primary program--and having begun, must continue through grade twelve--to determine what content can most profitably be taught at earlier years. I am not advocating pushing the content downward simply to speed up the age at which certain skills are developed; rather, I urge it to make the child independent as quickly as possible so that learning may become an activity in which he perceives himself as successful and as an individual capable of meeting educational challenges.

Have any of you considered conducting a four or five year experiment in which you would learn how much progress a young child can make if he is given an appropriate amount of stimulation, is assisted in setting high personal goals of achievement, and is freed of the shackles of teachers and administrators who believe that the primary years should not include structured, demanding content. I would like to see such a curriculum built and experimentation conducted without domination by such educators; only when such a study is done will we truly know the capacity of elementary school children.

SUGGESTED ORGANIZATIONAL AND CURRICULAR RESEARCH. As a consumer of educational research, I suggest to you these additional areas of possible research.

What are effective means of motivating the child of poverty?

What curriculum will most effectively help this youngster to "get hooked" on school? What kind of school plant will most effectively help the disadvantaged child to make a successful transition from home to school? Is the cottage school the answer? If so, this means that for these first years he will be with pupils of his own racial background. This, of course, presents another question. At what age do the effects of segregation have an impact upon the child, and can the school even ameliorate--much less overcome--the effects of residential segregration?

How may the school and other agencies help to overcome feelings of inadequacy in the scholastic environment? If you had felt inadequate in the classroom, how many of you would have even entered college? How many of you would continue for at least twelve years--the minimum time we hope young people will commit to education--an activity in which you felt that you could not succeed. Gertrude Whipple writes movingly of the self-concept of the disadvantaged child:

> ...great numbers of culturally disadvantaged children develop attitudes of frustration and hopelessness as early as the first grade. They stop trying to learn. Many girls soon become inert, many boys, aggressive; and children of both sexes develop into behavior cases. No wonder that large numbers of disadvantaged children drop out of school as quickly as they can, most of them to join the ranks of the employed.[9]

What kind of communication skills program is needed? Helene Lloyd in an address given at the Boston IRA convention spoke of the need to "plan with the staff a sequential developmental reading program for the school in which corrective and clinical services are an important factor." Lloyd emphasized that "reading, must for most of our inner-city children, be taught throughout the child's entire life, prekindergarten through grade 12, with a carefully-planned network of services to meet the needs not only of the in-school child but also of out-of-school poor readers and non-readers."

It is my belief that we desperately need a sequential, self-contained communication skills program which will be based upon the joint work of linguists, reading experts, and specialists in the techniques of oral and written English. As the curriculum is built and experimentally used, so must be developed techniques for teaching it; surely a systems approach to the development of the ability to communicate can and must be matched with a methodology which has been similarly developed to meet a particular need. Olsen and Larsen emphasize in these words the need for innovative curricular approaches for the disadvantaged child:

> Traditional concepts do not seem to meet (the needs of the culturally deprived child). Content is inappropriate and reflects the lack of an adequate theoretical curricular structure. If efforts to meet the demands of educating deprived children in depressed area schools are to proceed with logic and efficiency, then controlled attempts to meet these problems must be explicitly described and carefully evaluated.[7]

One of the most encouraging reading programs for high school students in Los Angeles is that being conducted in our "Student Achievement Centers." Each of the twenty-two secondary schools in the program has a special unit of instructors, consisting of two reading teachers; two teachers of mathematics, science, or social studies; and special clerical help. Each student receives two hours of special reading instruction daily, in addition to working in two content areas with teachers who have had special training in how to work within their subject area with pupils of low reading ability. Some of the results show significance at the .01 level of confidence.

Is there a need for specialized supervision? Harris and other investigators have recently re-emphasized the transcendent importance of the teacher in accelerating growth in reading skill. Of even greater importance is the role of the supervisor who is the one who has the responsibility for up-grading the skills of teachers now in service. It is not enough to change the curricula of supervisory and administrative courses in the universities and colleges. Research into effective means for rapidly altering both the perceptions and the skills of supervisors presently on the job is imperative. They must be retrained while continuing their normal routines so that they will pay greater attention to process than to method; know the fears, the limitations, and the strengths of the child of poverty; be aware of the special pressures experienced by the teacher of the disadvantaged

child; and be able to help the teacher alter his classroom techniques in the light of new needs.

SOME FALLACIES IN THE TEACHING OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD. As a last general item for discussion I would like to discuss briefly with you some areas of concern which, for lack of a better term, I have labeled "fallacies." I have encountered these perceptions, some of them relating to teachers, some to organizational patterns, to content, and to other aspects of the educational porgram, in many areas of the country.

The first of these is that teachers are ready to enter our ghetto schools upon graduation from college. I would argue that an internship program is vital in the poverty schools; the loss of teachers through resignation and transfer might not be so great if the new teacher could spend even a semester in a room in which someone else had the final responsibility. Our present procedures are too much like throwing a beginning swimmer into the middle of the 22-mile Catalina Channel and saying "swim to shore; I know you can, for you've had a course at the 'Y'."

A second fallacy, directly the result of demands placed upon school districts by the Federal government, is that one can be endlessly innovative. As you ladies and gentlemen work as consultants in Washington, can't you help make known the need for support of programs which are not necessarily innovative, but which have been previously demonstrated to be productive of beneficial change?

A third piece of academic folklore is that each teacher is best equipped to design the content of her own curriculum, is the best judge of methodology, and can best evaluate appropriate instructional materials. I would suggest that there are certain teaching procedures which have been demonstrated time and again to be of less value than others; it shouldn't be necessary to recapitulate the whole of reading research in the experiences of each teacher.

Another item which is discussed in, I suppose, almost every school in the Nation whenever teachers sit down to coffee, is the function of the primary program. It seems to me to be particularly inappropriate to plan the first years of the school life of the disadvantaged child for more than overcoming his deficiencies in communication skills and other areas which are fundamental to learning. Studies of the farm, of the harbor, and of the growth of his city should be subservient to the problems of equipping him to speak and to read effectively.

One last fallacy: the chief cause of low achievement lies in the disadvantaged child himself. I would argue that it does not. Rather, it lies in a culture which, both in the past and presently, exploits men to gain power--political, social and economic.

The failure of the family who lives in poverty to recognize the value of time; to speak in whole sentences and to value books; to respect and trust educators did not develop as a result of an incident which occurred yesterday or last year or ten years ago. Rather, it springs from sociological roots which are as old as our civilization. You and I are not responsible for having brought the slave to this country nor for having taken the land away from the Indians who originally owned it. But the members of our generation are responsible for caring more about training men to get to the moon than for supplying enough funds to give an adequate education to all of America's children.

Why are we concerning ourselves with various aspects of the education of disadvantaged young people and adults? Jane Ellen McAllister has expressed it in this way:

> (So that effective teaching can) influence learning favorably; make students so secure that they can fight quiet battles of prejudice in terms not merely of black and white but of understanding between people; help the pupil to engage in the intellectual life and develop an ability to enjoy it; change lives of pupils and teachers so that there is a sustained concern for human values, for spiritual sensitivity and regard for the human spirit.[6]

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